A Letter to America's Discarded Public Servants

By William J. Burns, *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2025

Dear Colleagues,

For three and a half decades as a career diplomat, I walked across the lobby of the State Department countless times—inspired by the Stars and Stripes and humbled by the names of patriots etched into our memorial wall. It was heartbreaking to see so many of you crossing that same lobby in tears following the reduction in force in July, carrying cardboard boxes with family photos and the everyday remains of proud careers in public service. After years of hard jobs in hard places—defusing crises, tending alliances, opening markets, and helping Americans in distress—you deserved better.

The same is true for so many other public servants who have been fired or pushed out in recent months: the remarkable intelligence officers I was proud to lead as CIA director, the senior military officers I worked with every day, the development specialists I served alongside overseas, and too many others with whom we've served at home and abroad.

The work you all did was unknown to many Americans, rarely well understood or well appreciated. And under the guise of reform, you all got caught in the crossfire of a retribution campaign—of a war on public service and expertise.

Those of us who have served in public institutions understand that serious reforms are overdue. Of course we should remove bureaucratic hurdles that prevent agencies like the State Department from operating efficiently. But there is a smart way and a dumb way to tackle reform, a humane way and an intentionally traumatizing way.

If today's process were truly about sensible reform, career officers—who typically rotate roles every few years—wouldn't have been fired simply because their positions have fallen out of political favor.

If this process were truly about sensible reform, crucial experts in technology or China policy in whom our country has invested so much wouldn't have been pushed out.

If this process were truly about reform, it would have addressed not only the manifestations of bloat and inefficiencies but also their causes—including congressionally mandated budget items.

And if this process were truly about sensible reform, you and your families wouldn't have been treated with gleeful indignity. One of your colleagues, a career diplomat, was given just six hours to clear out his office. "When I was expelled from Russia," he said, "at least Putin gave me six days to leave."

No, this is not about reform. It is about retribution. It is about breaking people and breaking institutions by sowing fear and mistrust throughout our government. It is about

paralyzing public servants—making them apprehensive about what they say, how it might be interpreted, and who might report on them. It is about deterring anyone from daring to speak truth to power.

I served six presidents: three Republicans and three Democrats. It was my duty to faithfully implement their decisions, even when I didn't agree with them. Career public servants have a profound obligation to execute the decisions of elected leaders, whether we voted for them or not; that discipline is essential to any democratic system.

Many of your fellow officers purged at the State Department were doing just that—faithfully executing decisions that ran contrary to their professional advice and preferences. They may not have supported the cancellation of Fulbright scholarships, the resettlement of Afrikaners, the expulsion of the Afghan partners who fought and bled with us for two decades, but they implemented those policies anyway. Still, those officers were fired.

Tensions between elected political leaders and career public servants are hardly new. Each of the presidents I served harbored periodic concerns about the reliability and sluggishness of government bureaucracy. Although individual officers could be remarkably resourceful, the State Department as an institution was rarely accused of being too agile or too full of initiative. There is a difference, however, between fixing bureaucratic malaise and hammering professional public servants into politicized robots.

That's what autocrats do. They cow public servants into submission—and in doing so, they create a closed system that is free of opposing views and inconvenient concerns. Their policy making, their ability to realize their aims, suffers as a result.

Vladimir Putin's foolish decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 offers a powerful example. Putin operated within a tight circle in the run-up to the war. He relied on a handful of long-serving advisers who either shared his flawed assumptions about Ukraine's ability to resist and the West's willingness to support it, or had learned a long time ago that it was not career-enhancing to question Putin's judgment. The results, especially in the first year of the war, were catastrophic for Russia.

For all its flaws and imperfections, our system still allows disciplined dissent—and it's better for it. Just as it is the duty of public servants to carry out orders we don't agree with, it is also our duty to be honest about our concerns within appropriate channels—or to resign if we can't in good conscience follow those orders. Sound decision making suffers if experts feel like they cannot offer their candid or contrary insights.

I could not have done my job as an ambassador, as a deputy secretary of state, or as the CIA director unless my colleagues were straightforward about their views. When I led secret talks with the Iranians more than a decade ago, I needed the unvarnished advice of diplomats and intelligence officers to help me navigate the complex world of nuclear programs and Iranian decision making. I needed colleagues to question my judgment sometimes, and offer creative, hard-nosed solutions.

There is a real danger in punishing dissent—not only to our profession, but to our country. Once you start, policy can become an extension of court politics, with little airing of alternative views or consideration of second- and third-order consequences.

Like some of you, I'm old enough to have lived through other efforts at reform and streamlining. After the end of the Cold War, budgets were cut significantly, and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the U.S. Information Agency were absorbed into the State Department. Years later, when I was serving as the American ambassador in Moscow, we reduced staff by about 15 percent over three years. None of those was a perfect process, but they were conducted in a thoughtful way, respectful of public servants and their expertise.

Long before any of us served in government, amid the escalation of the Cold War, in the 1950s, McCarthyism provided a vivid example of an alternative approach, full of deliberate trauma and casual cruelty. A generation of China specialists was falsely accused of being Communist sympathizers and driven from the State Department, kneecapping American diplomacy toward Beijing for years. Today's "reform" process—-at State and elsewhere across the federal government—bears much more resemblance to McCarthy's costly excesses than to any other era in which I've served. And it's much more damaging.

We live in a new era—one that is marked by major-power competition and a revolution in technology, and one that is more confusing, complicated, and combustible than any time before. I believe the United States still has a better hand to play than any of our rivals, unless we squander the moment and throw away some of our best cards. That's exactly what the current administration is doing.

We cannot afford to further erode the sources of our power at home and abroad. The demolition of institutions—the dismantling of USAID and Voice of America, the planned 50 percent reduction in the State Department's budget—is part of a bigger strategic self-immolation. We've put at risk the network of alliances and partnerships that is the envy of our rivals. We've even gutted the research funding that powers our economy.

If intelligence analysts at the CIA saw our rivals engage in this kind of great-power suicide, we would break out the bourbon. Instead, the sound we hear is of champagne glasses clinking in the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai.

Of course we should put our own national interests first. But winning in an intensely competitive world means thinking beyond narrowly defined self-interest and building coalitions that counterbalance our adversaries; it requires working together on "problems without passports" such as climate change and global health challenges, which no single country can solve on its own.

At our best, over the years I served in government, we were guided by enlightened self-interest, a balance of hard power and soft power. That's what produced victory in the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, the coalition success in Operation Desert

Storm, peace in the Balkans, nuclear-arms-control treaties, and the defense of Ukraine against Putin's aggression. The bipartisan PEPFAR program is a shining example of America at its best—saving tens of millions of people from the deadly threat of HIV/AIDS while also fostering some measure of stability in sub-Saharan Africa, establishing wider trust in American leadership, and keeping Americans safe.

We weren't always at our best, or always especially enlightened, as we stumbled into protracted and draining conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, or when we didn't press allies hard enough to contribute their fair share. Criticism of the current administration should not obscure any of that, or suggest a misplaced nostalgia for an imperfect past.

The growing danger today, however, is that we're focused exclusively on the "self" part of enlightened self-interest—at the expense of the "enlightened" part. The threat we face is not from an imaginary "deep state" bent on undermining an elected president, but from a weak state of hollowed-out institutions and battered and belittled public servants, no longer able to uphold the guardrails of our democracy or help the United States compete in an unforgiving world. We won't beat hostile autocrats by imitating them.

Many years ago, when I was finishing graduate school and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my professional life, my father sent me a note. He was a career Army officer, a remarkably decent man, and the best model of public service I have ever known. "Nothing can make you prouder," my dad wrote, "than to serve your country with honor." I've spent the past 40 years learning the truth in his advice.

I am deeply proud to have served alongside so many of you. Your expertise and your often quietly heroic public service have made an immeasurable contribution to the best interests of our country. You swore an oath—not to a party or a president, but to the Constitution. To the people of the United States.

To protect us. To defend us. To keep us safe.

You've fulfilled your oath, just as those still serving in government are trying their best to fulfill theirs. So will the next generation of public servants.

All of us have a profound stake in shaping their inheritance. I worry about how much damage we will do in the meantime. There is still a chance that the next generation will serve in a world where we curb the worst of our current excesses—stop betraying the ideals of public service, stop firing experts just because their statistics are unwelcome, and stop blowing up institutions that matter to our future. There is still a chance that the next generation could be present at the creation of a new era for America in the world, in which we're mindful of our many strengths but more careful about overreach.

There is, sadly, room for doubt about those chances. At this pivotal moment, there's a growing possibility that we will inflict so much damage on ourselves and our place in the world that those future public servants will instead find themselves present at the destruction—a self-inflicted, generational setback to American leadership and national

security.

But what I do not doubt is the abiding importance of public service, and the value of what you have done with yours. And I know that you will continue to serve in different ways, helping to stand watch over our great experiment, even as too many of our elected leaders seem to be turning their backs on it.

With appreciation to you and your families,

Bill Burns